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PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

THE IDEA OF A PHILOSOPHICAL PLATFORM

AT the Baltimore meeting of the American Philosophical Association two papers¹ were presented which emphasized the advantages that philosophy would derive from the formulation by its representatives of a body of doctrines and principles that might be regarded as at least provisionally established. Such a platform, it was argued, would in several ways promote the interests of philosophy. In the first place, it would remove from philosophy the standing reproach that it has arrived at no certain conclusions, and is therefore unworthy to be called a science. And, secondly, it would enable philosophy to take its place and perform its proper function in the development of scientific thought and social practise. Philosophy must prove its utility by furnishing principles of guidance and criticism in both the social and the natural sciences. If the demands from these sources are to be met, it must be possible to say in philosophy, somewhat as we do in the case of the other sciences, that there is a body of truths and principles which are accepted, by the competent representatives of the subject, as established. Workers in other departments, and intelligent outsiders in general, ought to be able to appeal to the results of philosophical investigation as they appeal to the conclusions of physics or of biology. Moreover, a formulation of results and principles would furnish to philosophers themselves a starting-point for further investigations, and thus promote unity and continuity of effort.

As only the abstracts of these papers are before me as I write, I do not wish to attempt any detailed criticism of them. It is to be noted, however, that both papers maintained that some formulation of established results is not only desirable, but also possible, and both proceeded to furnish suggestions as to how this end might be attained. These suggestions can not be discussed at present, but the general issue raised by the papers seems important and worthy of consideration.

It is, of course, a notorious fact that philosophers do not agree;

¹ "Concerning a Philosophical Platform," by Karl Schmidt, and "The Doctrine of Histurgy," by Christine Ladd Franklin.

and this is commonly regarded as a proof that no objective certainty is possible regarding the problems with which they occupy themselves. The lack of any established body of results which can be summed up in a series of definite propositions that the outsider can directly appropriate and apply in some field of practice, is doubtless another source of the wide-spread conviction that philosophy neither bakes bread nor can any longer give us "God, freedom, and immortality." As students and teachers of philosophy we do not, of course, admit the truth of these charges. They have been adequately refuted, at least in their popular form, by having been shown to rest on a fundamental misconception of the nature and function of philosophy, which is not one of the special sciences, dealing with a particular field of the phenomenal world, but is an attempt to understand and evaluate the standpoint and results of all the sciences and the meaning of experience as a whole. Philosophical results can not then be set down in the form of a statement of particular facts, and still less can they be separated from the problems and processes of which they are the outcome. It is undoubtedly true that in every science which has attained any considerable degree of organization the result derives its significance from the context in which it arises, and, taken by itself, is largely unmeaning; but in philosophy, for obvious reasons, it is still less possible to regard results as "fruit" which is external to and separable from the tree which bore it.

Moreover, as has often been pointed out, the special sciences attain to demonstrative certainty just in proportion to the abstractness of their procedure. The well-established body of facts which they seem to exhibit rests in every case upon assumptions and hypotheses. These, as scientific men know well, are often vague and sometimes contradictory. And when these ultimate principles come up for discussion in science there is found in this field scarcely less difference of opinion than obtains among the partisans of philosophical systems. These considerations and others of like nature are quite familiar to philosophical readers, and do not need to be further urged in this place. It may seem, however, that they were not sufficiently kept in mind by the authors of the papers to which I have referred above. Both writers, I venture to think, have had before them the ideal of established conclusions in philosophy which should be analogous to the accepted results of the special sciences. From the very nature of philosophy, it ought to be evident that such a platform is neither desirable nor possible of attainment.

Nevertheless, though we reject the idea of an officially established creed in philosophy, we can not deny that some agreement, especially regarding the nature of the problems that can profitably and significantly be raised and the kind of answers which they demand, is an

essential condition of the existence of the subject as a rational branch of human inquiry. For without such agreement, more or less explicitly acknowledged by philosophers, no fruitful cooperation or discussion would be possible. Anarchy would have come again, and each man would claim to be the measure of all things. A platform, then, does, in some sense, exist, and always has existed, in philosophy. In spite of the popular impression, philosophy is not a mere warring camp without settled principles or permanent gains. Unity of view is not lacking in philosophical discussions, but has afforded the basis which has made criticism possible. In philosophy, one's foes are frequently of one's own household—as is illustrated, for example, by Aristotle's constant polemic against Plato, or Hegel's reiterated criticisms of Kant and of Fichte. Criticism is the atmosphere in which philosophy draws its breadth; but, in order that this criticism shall be effective and significant, there must be a common problem and a large measure of agreement regarding the conceptions that are applicable in seeking to solve it. Without this, philosophical discussion tends to degenerate into mere logomachy, a verbal conflict from which each party emerges without honor or profit.

A philosophical platform, therefore, as we have said, exists necessarily, since philosophy exists as a rational and objective mode of inquiry. But it is necessary to go on to ask, In what does this platform consist and how has it been constituted? There have been no ecumenical councils to settle philosophical creeds, or any explicit formulations of common doctrines on the part of philosophers. Moreover, when we read the discussions of our own time or of any particular generation, they seem to present nothing but the differences of individuals and of parties, and to afford no possible basis of agreement. This appearance is, however, deceptive. Unity is being achieved in and through the process of emphasizing differences. Out of the eater there comes forth meat. This unity often comes to light in a form and to a degree that can be appreciated as the consequence of the work of a few years, or a single generation. But it is only when we look to the history of philosophy as a whole that we become conscious of the fundamental basis of agreement, the real process that renders philosophy objective and real. For the history of philosophy is not a mere collection of individual opinions, but a process of development. The notion of development, however, is conceivable only when it is seen to involve the continuity of a universal principle which is present in all stages of the history of philosophical thought, and of which these stages must be regarded as the progressive determination. Without such a conception, I do not see how it is possible to speak at all of the development of philosophy. And if it is impossible to discover any genuine development in the history of philosophy, if the term

“development” is only a figure of speech, then the efforts of any individual to give an objective interpretation of his experience must forever remain fruitless. So long as the individual believes that reason and philosophical truth are merely in him, and are not manifest in the world and in the history of thought, his deliverances are not likely to be of great value. By his own unaided efforts no man can reach philosophical truth, any more than he can become rational or moral by isolating himself from the beliefs and practises of society. To become a philosopher, he must assimilate and reproduce in his own thinking the development of philosophical problems and answers as these are shown in the course of history. In this way alone will he attain objectivity of view and find a platform on which he can unite with other philosophers.

It may be objected, however, that experience has abundantly shown that the history of philosophy can furnish no objective standard of philosophical truth. Of this history it may be well said,

Hic liber est in quo quaerit sua dogmata quisque
Invenit et pariter dogmata quisque sua,

since there is opportunity for the widest divergence of opinion in the interpretation and evaluation of the various philosophical systems. One school, for example, maintains that the philosophy of Kant and the post-Kantian idealists represents the culmination of modern philosophy, while others tell us that the true line of development runs around, not through, Kant. Each one, it may be said, will find in the history of philosophy his own favorite doctrines, or illustrations of the errors which he is most anxious to combat and expose, and will thus in the end use his own conceptions as the standard of evaluation. Hence the study of the history of philosophy can never make a philosopher: one must reach his conclusions by his own independent processes of thought, or with the aid of contemporaries who are occupied with the “vital” problems of the present time.

Now it is unquestionably true that the mere acquaintance with the facts and external features of the different historical systems is of no great advantage, and in itself does not make a philosopher. But to comprehend the *development* of philosophical thought is to gain an understanding of the significance of philosophical problems and the true function and relations of the conceptions that appear in the course of its history. This involves an active process of philosophizing on one's own part: it requires us to interpret, reconstruct, and evaluate the historical results through our own thinking. The process of interpretation and evaluation does not signify, however, that we have the right arbitrarily to construe these systems in an external way in accordance with any preconceived notions of our own. There is a constant process which is at once a giving and a

receiving. We neither passively assimilate nor arbitrarily construe, but by following and apprehending the inner movement of the history of philosophy we are qualified to enter into it, and become a part of it. If there is any truth in the assertion that the history of philosophy is a genuine development, then to comprehend this is an indispensable part of philosophy itself. If, on the other hand, history presents no real development, it would seem that the opponents of philosophy are right in their belief that the history of philosophical opinions has demonstrated the impossibility of philosophy as a subject of rational human investigation. For what hope is there in individual effort if the thought of the race has proved totally incompetent to its task? And what possibility is there of cooperation, if the past has given us no platform on which to stand?

There is, of course, nothing new to philosophical readers in the views which I have here attempted to express. But they seem to be of interest in relation to the question of a philosophical platform, which was brought forward at Baltimore. They also seem to me important and worthy of consideration in view of the evident lessening of interest in historical studies among American philosophers at the present time. If it is true that some agreement as to the aims and method of philosophy is essential both to the progress of philosophy itself and to the influence and position of the subject among the other sciences, and if, further, this agreement can be attained only by arriving at an understanding of the meaning of philosophy as it is exhibited in its historical development, can we afford to neglect historical studies or to regard them as of secondary importance? For the continuity of our thought with the past is at the same time our bond of union and basis of objectivity, and, as such, it, therefore, is the only thing that insures the reality of philosophy at the present time or that furnishes a guarantee for its future.

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THE TIME PARADOX IN PERCEPTION

THAT the object of perception is temporally present, that its temporal status is strictly *now*, seems obviously given in the fact of perception itself. The neighboring house which I see through my window apparently presents itself to me at the very instant of vision. Perceptive experience seems to require by its very nature that subject and object (whatever facts are indicated by these terms) shall be precisely simultaneous. If, however, we regard the matter after the fashion of naïve realism, and hold that a mental